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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 000862

SIPDIS

NSC STAFF FOR SINGH

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: EGYPT: GOE SET TO POSTPONE LOCAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS  
BY TWO YEARS

Classified by ECPO Minister Counselor Michael Corbin for  
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: At the direction of President Mubarak, parliament is expected to pass shortly legislation that will postpone by two years local council elections which had been due in April. Senior GOE contacts put the move in the context of broader reforms that will overhaul and modernize Egypt's local governance system. Others believe the move was designed to prevent the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) from building on its success in last fall's People's Assembly elections by forcefully competing (for the first time) at the local level.

A strong showing for the MB in local councils could alter the calculus for the next presidential elections, potentially opening the door for Islamists to compete for Egypt's highest office. While the GOE will inevitably be criticized for this move, the fact is that given the continued absence of coherent voter lists, the disarray of the legal opposition, and the current strength of the MB, the process -- had it gone forward -- would have been as flawed and problematic as the third round of last fall's parliamentary elections. If the GOE uses the extra time it has bought to pursue meaningful electoral reforms and to streamline the local governance system, we may look back on the delay as a positive step. End summary.

2. (C) President Mubarak forwarded to Parliament on February 8 a request that the legislature extend the mandate of sitting local councils by two years. The move would effectively postpone local council elections that were due in April. The Shura Council approved the request February 11, and forwarded it to the People's Assembly, where the ruling NDP's substantial majority will guarantee its approval and entry into law.

3. (C) Explaining the decision to the Ambassador during a February 12 meeting, Trade Minister Rachid said that the primary reason for the postponement was the need first to enact genuine decentralization legislation to make local councils "meaningful, and give them real authority. Now they are just ceremonial; nothing they can do is consequential." There would be little point to conducting elections to local councils at this point, he argued, since local councils have no authority. He went on to give examples from his own time on Alexandria's local council.

4. (C) Rachid said that pushing such legislation is a priority of the government. The Ambassador asked whether it might include provisions for election of governors. He said this would require constitutional amendment, and that the party will push for opening the constitution to amendments of this very nature. Rachid said "We must do this. It is the only way. Then we can resolve many things."

5. (C) A number of Embassy contacts had predicted, well before news of Mubarak's move broke February 8, that the local council elections would be postponed. Of particular concern to the GOE, observers believe, was the prospect of another wave of successes by Muslim Brotherhood (MB) candidates. The MB, in the wake of substantial gains in last fall's turbulent parliamentary elections, had announced that it would compete for the first time in the local elections.

6. (C) The pro-government weekly Rose al-Yousef alluded to the GOE's MB fears in an editorial supporting the decision to delay published February 11. Especially following the Danish cartoon controversy, the paper argued, "MB candidates would have surely won," had elections been held as scheduled. Furthermore, the paper added, the delay will give the GOE time to repair its flawed voter lists and develop new, more accurate lists linked to the automated national identity card program.

7. (C) Predictably, the Muslim Brotherhood lashed out at the decision, describing it as a move intended primarily to undermine the electoral momentum of Islamists, following the fall parliamentary polls and particularly in the context of the recent Hamas victory in the Palestinian territories -- a development received in Egypt with elation in some quarters and trepidation in others. Dr. Essam al-Erian, a moderate MB

leader often quoted in the western media, told a western wire service that the move reflected GOE fears of rising Islamist electoral tide, and particular concern about the possibility that Islamists could clear the hurdles for presidential candidates laid out in the June 2005 constitutional amendment.

18. (SBU) (Note: By winning 88 of 444 elected seats in the People's Assembly, the MB easily crossed the 65 seat nomination threshold, the first of several hurdles an independent candidate must clear to run for president. An independent candidate would also need nominations from 25 members of the 64 seat Shura Council and nominations from 10 local council members in each of at least 14 of Egypt's 26 provinces. In the 2002 local council elections, almost 50,000 seats, ranging from the lowliest village council seat to seats in Egypt's 26 provincial assemblies were in play. More than 50 percent of the seats were uncontested and filled by candidates nominated by the NDP. Ultimately, 99 percent of the seats were filled by NDP nominees. End note.)

19. (C) Comment: While the GOE will inevitably be criticized by different quarters for this move, there was no prospect that these polls, had they gone forward, could have had adhered to international standards or made a contribution to Egypt's democratic development. The voter lists are still hopelessly jumbled and the legal opposition is in far greater disarray than they were only two months ago. At the same time the MB, which was prepared to compete for the first time, appears more popular and better organized than ever before. Moreover, in contrast to the parliamentary polls, there is no provision for even cursory judicial supervision of the local elections, a fact that would have inevitably made the process even more contentious. If the GOE uses the "grace period" it has bought for itself by overhauling voter lists and streamlining, through legislation, the local governance system, we might look back at the postponement as a positive step. End comment.  
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